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FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3948
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1468
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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 000633

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DEPT FOR AF/S, PRM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SF](#) [ZI](#)
SUBJECT: FEW ZIMBABWEANS RETURNING HOME TO VOTE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Teitelbaum. Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Only a small number of Zimbabweans living in South Africa will return to Zimbabwe to vote in the March 29 election, according to Mathula Lusinga, a Zimbabwean exile community activist and head of a DFID-funded project on diaspora voting. The reasons vary: many Zimbabweans live in South Africa illegally so they are afraid they will have difficulty returning to South Africa if they vote in Zimbabwe; others were unable to register to vote (or were unsure if they were still registered); and a significant number are cynical about the value of elections. Neither the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) nor the divided diaspora groups are successfully organizing Zimbabweans in South Africa around the election. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) PolOff met on March 26 with Mathula Lusinga, Project Officer for the Peace and Democracy Project (PDP). PDP is a DFID-funded program, implemented through Freedom House, that seeks to encourage Zimbabweans living in South Africa to return to Zimbabwe to vote in the March 29 election, to increase awareness in the Zimbabwean diaspora about the conditions for free and fair elections, and to build links between the disparate Zimbabwean exile groups. PDP has set up ten "Get Out the Vote" stations in Johannesburg and Pretoria to hand out materials to Zimbabwean exiles and stimulate discussion about political events in Zimbabwe. The stations are drawing large crowds, especially in the late afternoon. Despite the likely benefit to their cause, the MDC is not playing a major role in the campaign, Lusinga said.

Few Returning to Vote

¶3. (SBU) A significant number of Zimbabweans have asked PDP about receiving free transport to Zimbabwe for the election, although Lusinga said he suspects most are not properly registered voters; some simply want a free ride home. As of March 26, PDP and its partner groups planned to transport only two buses of people (approximately 90 people) to Zimbabwe for the election. Lusinga noted that a much larger number of Zimbabweans are already home via public transport or their own vehicles, many for the Easter holiday break. However, he speculated that no more than 10,000 - 20,000 Zimbabweans living in South Africa (out of an estimated 800,000 to 3 million) will, in the end, return home to vote

in the election.

¶4. (SBU) Lusinga cited a number of reasons that Zimbabweans in the diaspora are not returning to Zimbabwe to vote:

-- many Zimbabweans live in South Africa illegally, so are afraid they will have difficulty returning to South Africa after they vote;

-- many Zimbabweans cannot afford to leave work in South Africa -- often in the informal sector -- for the time required to vote;

-- many Zimbabweans were unable to register to vote, or are unsure where they should vote given the recent delimitation changes in Zimbabwe; and

-- many Zimbabweans have lost faith in the electoral system and believe change will only come when President Mugabe dies.

Diaspora Groups Divided and Doing Little

¶5. (C) Lusinga's PDP is attempting to work with a range of Zimbabwean exile organizations based in South Africa to encourage political activism, including the National Qencourage political activism, including the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, SAWIMA, the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum, the Zimbabwe CSO Forum, and the Zimbabwe Torture Survivors Project. However, Lusinga admitted that coordination has been difficult given the extensive in-fighting between the various diaspora organizations, centered around jealousy over donor funds, political differences, and ethnicity. These divisions have undermined the election initiative. MDC Treasurer Roy Bennett told PolOff that the Zimbabwean diaspora community was so divided and "tribalist" -- much more so than in Zimbabwe itself, he believes -- that Bennett chose to focus on fundraising among the smaller group of elite Zimbabwean businessmen living in Johannesburg's northern suburbs.

Comment

¶6. (C) We agree with Lusinga's assessment that only a small number of Zimbabweans living in South Africa will return home to vote in the election. Estimating even an approximate number is nearly impossible, but we do not believe the number of voters will be statistically significant. We also agree with Lusinga's observation that the Zimbabwean diaspora is sharply divided along ethnic, generational, and economic lines, with many -- perhaps most -- exiles just trying to survive and send remittances to their families in Zimbabwe. Ironically, this migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa, brought about by Mugabe's misrule, has largely benefited Mugabe and his ZANU-PF regime: a significant number of regime opponents, especially young men, have left the country, and the diaspora's remittances to family members at home help keep Mugabe's sinking regime afloat.

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